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**PROBABLE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA THROUGH 1957**

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 30 October 1956. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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PROBABLE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA THROUGH 1957

THE PROBLEM

To evaluate recent political developments in South Korea and to estimate their probable political significance through 1957; and to estimate the probable reactions in Korea assuming US support were to be reduced.¹

CONCLUSIONS

1. President Rhee continues to be dominant in South Korea. Despite widespread popular dissatisfaction with his regime, his position will probably not be seriously challenged at least during the next year.

2. The recent election as Vice President of Chang Myon from the opposition Democratic Party has been followed by considerable reshuffling in the cabinet and in the military leadership and by unrest in the Liberal Party. These developments make the presidential succession somewhat uncertain. However, we believe that on Rhee's death the constitutionally designated successor will take office, even if,

as is possible, the constitution is amended to bar Chang. Even an orderly succession would almost certainly be followed by a period of political instability, and the possibility of violent disorders cannot be excluded. Any successor is likely to be less intransigent than Rhee both on domestic and foreign issues.

3. If US military or economic assistance were substantially reduced, or if the US made a major reduction in its forces in Korea, President Rhee would be vehement in his objections and would seek by threats, pressures, or possibly the creation of incidents to raise US fears of renewed hostilities in Korea. However, we believe it unlikely that Rhee would in fact launch a unilateral attack north.

¹The present estimate does not consider possible repercussions of the assumed US action outside South Korea, nor does it consider longer run consequences of US action within South Korea.

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DISCUSSION

4. The presidential election in South Korea in May 1956 revealed stronger popular opposition to President Rhee and the Liberal Party than had been evident up to that time. Even though the major opposition candidate died before election day, President Rhee, who had received 74.6 percent of the total vote in 1952, polled only 55.6 percent. Moreover, Yi Ki-pung, the Liberal Party vice presidential candidate, was defeated by Chang Myon, the nominee of the opposition Democratic Party. Although the election has apparently not fundamentally shaken Rhee's domination of the ROK government, it has revealed deficiencies in the apparatus of his control, and has been followed by a number of changes. As a result the political situation in South Korea has become considerably more obscure.

Postelection Political Developments

5. The President has shifted Chong Il-kwon, former army chief of staff, to the chairmanship of the joint chiefs of staff, a position of less military influence, and replaced Admiral Son Won-il as Minister of National Defense. President Rhee probably took these actions partly because of concern over the failure of certain elements of the army to give its full support to him and the Liberal Party in the May elections, and because of the potential challenge to his position inherent in the close relationship between General Chong, Admiral Son, and Yi Ki-pung. Another action tending to reduce the influence of General Chong was a major reshuffle of army general officers initiated by the new army chief of staff, General Yi Hyong-kun, and approved by President Rhee. This resulted in the transfer of many of Chong's supporters from key posts.

6. President Rhee's selection of General Yi Hyong-kun as the new army chief of staff probably enhanced Rhee's control of the army. General Yi has shown himself less amenable to US guidance than was his predecessor, and is probably more responsive to Rhee's wishes. Although General Yi is known

to have had friendly relations with Chang Myon and Lee Bum Suk, he is not known to have developed an association with any political party. General Yi's future political leanings are uncertain but he will probably remain loyal to Rhee during the latter's lifetime.

7. Rhee has probably increased the responsiveness of the National Police Force to his orders by appointing as its new chief "Tiger" Kim, who is noted for his brutal application of force when so ordered. The army's CIC, the other major internal security force, remains under Rhee's direct control as do the Provost Marshal General Command and some small semi-official strong-arm groups.

8. President Rhee has made little progress in strengthening the Liberal Party. He has forced the party to accept Yi Ki-pung's continued nominal leadership despite the latter's defeat in the elections. He probably continues to favor Yi — an ineffective political leader — because he represents no real challenge to Rhee's power. Rhee has continued to resist party participation in the determination of government policy. Moreover, he has done little to improve the position of the Liberal Party in the face of the possibility that a member of the Democratic Party will succeed to the presidency. This is a matter of concern to many party members and some are probably considering a switch in their political affiliation. As a result, Rhee is under increased pressure to modify his dominant position in the government and in the party. However, though he may make concessions on particular issues, he will probably not accept any significant modification of his personal control of the government. Furthermore, unless Rhee is physically incapacitated, the majority of the Liberal Party will probably not seriously challenge his control, at least during the next year.

9. The Democratic Party is attempting to cope with the implications of its unexpected success. The party has in the past suffered from factionalism, and the sudden death of

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Sin Ik-hui (its presidential candidate and principal leader) seemed to open the door to greater disunity. However, since the election factional leaders have shown a willingness to maintain basic party unity and Chang's position within the party has been strengthened. Both of these trends were probably further enhanced by the recent unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Chang.

10. Despite the widespread popular dissatisfaction with his administration, President Rhee will probably be able to continue in his dominant role. Even though there is little improvement in internal conditions, Rhee can probably continue to count on the support of the army, the internal security forces, the majority of civil servants, and the bulk of the Liberal Party.

The Problem of Succession

11. The election of a vice president from the opposition and subsequent political developments have introduced considerable uncertainty into the presidential succession. President Rhee has made it evident that he is opposed to Vice President Chang as a successor, and it is possible that Rhee, during the next year, will call upon the National Assembly to amend the constitution to prevent Chang's succession. The shifts in army leaders, the maneuvering of many politicians, and the continued factionalism in the various parties are additional factors which contribute to the unsettled political situation.

12. Despite these circumstances, we believe that on Rhee's death, the succession will be in accordance with constitutional provisions whether or not the constitution has been amended to bar Chang. These estimates are based on the following considerations:

a. Many political and military leaders fear the consequences of a collapse of constitutional government.

b. Almost all Korean political and military leaders recognize that US support is essential to any ROK regime and believe that the US would view unfavorably any unconstitutional seizure of power.

Even an orderly and constitutional succession would almost certainly be followed by a period

of political instability, owing to the removal of President Rhee's strong leadership and to the factionalism characteristic of Korean politics.

13. However, there are possible developments during the next year which could seriously complicate the situation and might cause violent disorders. One possibility would be an attempt by Rhee to force through a constitutional amendment to deny the presidency to Chang. Another might be a prolonged illness of Rhee during which his capacity to govern was brought into question.² In such an event, leaders of the administration and the Liberal Party would probably seek to prevent Chang from assuming power in accordance with constitutional provisions. Another possibility is the assassination of Rhee or Chang. Should Rhee be the one assassinated, chances favoring Chang's succession would be less. Finally, the possibility will continue to exist that a group may seek to exploit the confused situation at the time of Rhee's death by attempting a palace coup. Regardless of the cause, we believe that should violent disorders break out, either before or after Rhee's death, the army would probably intervene to restore order and might assume political control.

Probable ROK Reactions to a Reduction in US Support

14. President Rhee and some military leaders (including General Yi Hyong-kun) have considered the problem of modernizing the ROK military forces. They apparently have been thinking in terms of an over-all force reduction, compensated for by the introduction of modern weapons. In this connection they probably assume a continuation of US assist-

² The ROK constitution does not specify procedures determining the incapacity of the president. Article 52 reads as follows:

"In case of the inability of the president to execute the duties of his office for any reason, the vice president shall act as the president and in case of inability of both the president and the vice president to execute the duties of their offices, a member of the State Council selected in the order determined by law, shall act as the president."

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ance, at least at the present level, to take care of the increased cost of modern arms, particularly jet aircraft.

15. Should the US propose a substantial cut in military aid, President Rhee would oppose it with vehemence and would seek to raise US fears of a renewal of hostilities in Korea. This he might do by generating border incidents designed to give the impression of hostile Communist intent, and by threatening to withdraw his forces from the UN command or to march north on his own. He would probably also threaten to seek a rapprochement with the North Korean Communist regime. Concurrently he would probably attempt to bring indirect pressure on the US government by taking action prejudicial to the interests of the US business community in Korea and by increasing the ROK anti-Japanese campaign. He would probably also become increasingly uncooperative in the implementation of the US aid programs.

16. If US military aid were reduced substantially despite ROK protestation, Rhee might attempt to maintain his forces at existing levels by deficit financing and, perhaps, by diverting some ROK funds from other uses. Although he would know that the ROK would not have sufficient foreign exchange to purchase equipment and supplies and that therefore ROK military capabilities would decline, nevertheless he might take this action hoping to force the US to reconsider the cut in military aid rather than accept the possibility of an economic collapse in South Korea. He might also withdraw his forces from the UN command. It is not likely, however, that he would seek a rapprochement with the North Korean Communist regime.

17. The ROK probably would consider a major reduction of US forces in Korea a more serious indication of an adverse trend in US policy toward Korea than a reduction in military assistance to the ROK, and hence Rhee would be more likely to withdraw his forces from the UN command than in the circumstance discussed in paragraph 16 above. From the Korean point of view the presence of a substantial force of US troops in Korea is a

visible and more dependable guarantee of continuing US interest in Korea than the existence of a security treaty.

18. However, in either case we believe that Rhee is unlikely to launch a unilateral attack on North Korea. Rhee and ROK military leaders generally recognize that the ROK alone cannot achieve unification through military action. They also probably believe that under present world circumstances the chances of embroiling the US in renewed hostilities would be slight. However, the possibility of a unilateral ROK attack or of generated incidents which might precipitate fighting will remain, at least as long as Rhee retains power. The danger of a ROK attack would be most critical during the period immediately following a US decision to reduce assistance or to reduce its own forces. Even some of the military leaders who have in the past been a restraining influence would be persuaded that military action was necessary before the military situation in South Korea had deteriorated.

19. The large scale US economic aid since mid-1953 has been essential to South Korea's survival and rehabilitation. A substantial reduction in US economic assistance would not only reduce the availability of counterpart funds for support of the ROK military budget, but would also almost certainly reduce the already low living standards and increase opposition to President Rhee and his administration. Popular unrest might develop into civil disorder which would probably have an anti-American complexion. The North Korean and other Communists would also seek to exploit this situation. Accordingly, President Rhee would react almost as vigorously to a US proposal for a substantial reduction in economic assistance as to a proposal to reduce military assistance.

20. It is likely that any successor to Rhee will be less fully in control of the Korean political situation and less intransigent. Accordingly, his successor would probably be more amenable to a reduction in US military assistance, particularly if the US continued to furnish a high level of economic assistance.

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